DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 379 369 UD 030 283

AUTHOR	Immerwahr, John; And Others
TITLE	The Broken Contract. Connecticut Citizens Look at Public Education.
INSTITUTION	Public Agenda Foundation, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund, New Haven, CT.
PUB DATE	94
NOTE	40p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Basic Skills; Blacks; Discipline; *Educational Change; Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; Minority Groups; *Parent Participation; *Public Opinion; Public Schools; *School Desegregation; School Safety; Surveys; Whites
IDENTIFIERS	African Americans; *Connecticut; Focus Groups

ABSTRACT

A state-wide survey of public attitudes about education in Connecticut conducted by Public Agenda, supplemented by focus groups and a survey of educators and community leaders, suggests that the Connecticut public is ambivalent about support for education and for proposals to integrate the schools. Resistance seems to stem from the public perception that educators and parents themselves have broken the contract with the public. The Connecticut public believes that the schools are failing to maintain a safe environment for children, that they are not doing a good job of teaching the basics, and that the schools are not stressing discipline and good work habits. They also think that parents are not fulfilling their responsibilities. The study focuses specifically on integration and the plight of inner-city schools, where the problems recognized throughout the state are seen as compounded by social problems. African Americans are more likely (87 percent) than Whites (67 percent) to endorse integration as a goal and a value, with Latinos between the two groups (81 percent), but there is general agreement about violence, crime, and drugs in the schools. Eighteen tables present survey findings. Contains an eight-item list of related Public Agenda publications. (SLD)

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ED 379 369

THE BROKEN CONTRACT

Connecticut Citizens Look At Public Education

A Report from Public Agenda
Prepared for the
William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

CG030283

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THE BROKEN CONTRACT

Connecticut Citizens Look At Public Education

John Immerwahr
with Jill Boese and Will Friedman

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FOREWORD

David M. Nee
Executive Director, William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

December, 1994

The Graustein Memorial Fund's mission is to improve the effectiveness of education in order to foster both personal development and leadership. We have chosen initially to focus on the State of Connecticut and on young children, in pre-school and elementary years. We believe that policy research can play an important strategic role by informing public debates about education.

As we began our work in Connecticut in 1993 and early 1994, we initiated studies that would help us build an understanding and a picture of the state. We saw that it was important to find out what citizens think — rather than what policymakers may believe citizens think — about education. To that end, we turned to Public Agenda, a not-for-profit research organization that aims to help the public build an informed judgement — as opposed to mere opinion — about important issues.

The Connecticut context invited such a survey. Several pending policy changes suggested that a deeper understanding of citizens' views on public education would be very useful.

- A group of business, political and educational leaders, the Commission on Educational Excellence in Connecticut (CEEC), was working toward a statewide plan for education reform. The desired bill failed to pass. Nonetheless, the Commission's process increased the level of public interest in educational issues, and was noteworthy for reflecting a widespread understanding in the business community that students graduating from high school must be prepared to a higher standard in order to compete in the work force of a global economy. The bill failed to pass because of the public's fears and doubts about the content of the reform agenda.

- The state was also deeply engaged in regional planning for the voluntary integration of public schools. As we go to press, many towns and cities have turned down the regional plans.

- A private for-profit company has been invited to assume a large part of management responsibility for Hartford's public schools, generating disparate fears and aspirations among parents, teachers, administrators and policymakers.

- There are sharp changes in political leadership at the state and national level.

We feel an obligation to find out what educators, community leaders and citizens think as we begin to embrace our work in Connecticut. In both education reform and in integration it is apparent that at least part of the story is widespread misunderstanding among and between these sectors.

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In reading this report, we hope the reader will keep these questions in mind:

1. Does the survey tell us something about why education reform efforts have failed to win widespread public support?

2. Does the survey suggest pathways forward, through which a *common* agenda could be forged among all who are concerned about the condition of the state's children?

We would submit that the answer to both questions is yes. There are areas of agreement among the parties. As will become clear in reading this report, the public in this survey clearly seems prepared to allocate more resources to inner-city schools and to reject notions of a "voucher" system to support private education with public funds.

Connecticut's recent bumpy experiences with education reform and integration demonstrate convincingly that what the public believes — as opposed to what reformers may intend — spells success or failure for these efforts. (For instance, despite the voluntary nature of the required integration plans, they have been consistently viewed at a local level as a prelude to "forced busing.") Therefore, we who care about the condition and education of children must care about what people think. To improve communication among the general public, elected officials, community leaders and educators, we must understand each other's concerns. We must become as willing to listen as to speak.

At the Graustein Memorial Fund, we think that listening is both a personal skill and an organizational attribute. Thanks to Public Agenda, this report shares with others our first attempt at a large-scale effort to listen to the voices of Connecticut citizens.

We believe that the survey will be of interest to citizens, educators and policymakers, and we invite all readers to share their comments with us.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Many of Connecticut's educational leaders are convinced that the Connecticut public has "turned its back on the state's children." There is widespread concern among educational leadership that most people in Connecticut are complacent about the schools in their own communities, unconcerned about schools in other areas and especially indifferent to the problems of the inner-cities. As a result, they feel that the public has broken the implicit social contract where older generations support the education of the next generation, and they see the public as increasingly unwilling to support education, precisely at a time when a public school system overburdened by social problems is desperately in need of support. To test this perception, Public Agenda conducted a state-wide survey of public attitudes, supplemented by focus groups and a special survey of educators and community leaders.

Our research shows that the leadership perception is partly right and partly wrong. The Connecticut public is ambivalent about support for education and about proposals to integrate the schools. However, resistance grows not from lack of concern, but from a view that the schools are headed in the wrong direction. From the public's point of view, it is educators and parents themselves who have broken the contract. Specifically, the Connecticut public feels that the schools are failing to hold up their end in four significant ways: failure to maintain a safe environment for children, failure of many parents to support their own children, failure to teach even basic literacy and computational skills, and an inadequate emphasis on discipline.

Safety

Eighty-one percent of the Connecticut public believe that keeping the schools free of drugs, crime and gangs should be a top priority, and only 28% think that the schools are doing a good job at this.

Parents

Eighty-two percent think that parents are "not fulfilling their responsibilities toward the education of their children." Many Connecticut residents do not see what good it does to support public education when parents themselves are not doing their job.

Many Connecticut residents do not see what good it does to support public education when parents themselves are not doing their job.

Basics

Fifty-eight percent believe that the schools are not doing a good job of teaching "the basics" and people are deeply skeptical of new educational methodologies such as heterogeneous grouping. Ninety-four percent think that schools should be changed so that no one can graduate from high school without being able to write and speak English clearly.

Discipline and Respect for Authority

There is a widespread belief that the schools are not stressing discipline, failing to teach students good work habits and allowing some students to disrupt the education of others. Eighty-six percent support taking persistent troublemakers out of class, and 83% think that students should not be allowed to leave school grounds during the day.

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From the public's perspective, these priorities have three things in common: they are essential for quality education, the public schools are not doing a good job on them and they have virtually nothing to do with money. By an almost two to one margin, people say that schools especially need "greater accountability and more discipline, things that do not cost more money."

Furthermore, Connecticut residents say that they have been burned by past reform efforts, which have raised taxes and teachers' salaries but not, in the public's view, improved the quality of education. Only 20% of the state's residents think that increasing teacher salaries in the 1980's substantially improved education in the state. Catholic schools, by contrast, are perceived as doing a good job by 62% of Connecticut residents, and our study suggests this is precisely because they emphasize the basics and remove trouble-makers.

Despite their criticisms, Connecticut residents are not willing to abandon the public schools. Only one-third of the public support instituting a system of vouchers that could be used at private schools. And only 24% favor measures to have private companies manage the public schools.

The survey also focused specifically on integration and the plight of inner-city schools. African-Americans and whites share many of the same criticisms of the state's schools in general and of inner-city schools in particular. Both groups agree that the most severe problems for inner-city students include unstable families, lack of parental support, and crime and drugs.

Only 20% of the state's residents think that increasing teacher salaries in the 1980's substantially improved education in the state.

But African-Americans are more likely than whites to single out more school-specific concerns: low levels of funding, a scarcity of good teachers, and the presence of many teachers who do not enforce high standards. Thus, they are more supportive of measures that would increase funding for inner-city schools and promote integration. Whites are more likely to think that such steps will not make much difference to inner-city children unless and until schools and families first deal with the top priorities: safety, parental involvement, the basics, and discipline.

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INTRODUCTION

Early in 1994, the William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund asked Public Agenda to conduct an in-depth investigation of attitudes toward public education in Connecticut. The Memorial Fund has a long-term interest in education and there were a number of specific events that made the research particularly timely. An educational reform bill had just been defeated in the legislature; in the end the bill was opposed both by teachers' unions and by a highly visible citizen's group. In addition, a court case—Sheff vs. O'Neill—focused attention on inequities between the schools in Connecticut's wealthy suburbs, which boast some of the finest schools in the nation, and the dismal state of education in the state's inner-city areas. To avoid court-mandated solutions, state and education leaders in Connecticut are exploring voluntary integration measures. As of this writing, the situation has not been resolved.

These events occurred in the context of a prolonged downturn in the state's economy, which has added to the schools' woes. Community leaders are especially concerned with the plight of Connecticut's inner-cities, which are as distressed as any urban area in the country. From a national point of view, Connecticut provides both a laboratory for reform and a cautionary tale for the rest of the nation. If the educational problems of Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven cannot be solved, what hope is there for large cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit and Philadelphia?

In this study, Public Agenda looked at attitudes among Connecticut's leadership and the public on two main questions: What does Connecticut need to do to develop a first class education system for *all* of its young people, and, specifically, how can the state improve schools in the inner-cities?

If the educational problems of Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven cannot be solved, what hope is there for large cities such as Los Angeles, Detroit and Philadelphia?

Our findings report the opinions of three separate groups:

Educators: Public Agenda conducted in-depth, confidential interviews with fourteen top education leaders and policymakers (see Appendix for the names of those interviewed), held three focus groups with Connecticut teachers and surveyed 80 professional educators.

Community Leaders: Public Agenda surveyed 100 community leaders throughout the state including: mayors, state legislators, business executives, union leaders, newspaper editors and religious leaders.

General Public: The study also draws on the voices of the general public of Connecticut, by means of a statewide telephone survey of 1,200 Connecticut residents. In addition to 800 members of the general public, the survey "oversampled" 200 minority residents and 200 parents with children in the public schools, allowing us to make more accurate generalizations about the attitudes of these subgroups. In addition, Public Agenda conducted nine focus groups with parents, adults without school-aged children and high school students.

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THE BROKEN CONTRACT?

Connecticut's educators generally report that the state's schools are doing a good job under tough conditions. For example:

> Eighty-two percent of educators surveyed say that the schools are doing a "pretty good job," given the social problems and the lack of funding.
>
> Sixty-four percent think that the schools are doing a better job today than when they went to school.
>
> Sixty-three percent think that inner-city schools in Connecticut are doing as well as or better than inner-city schools in other states.
>
> Only 37% believe that inner-city schools in Connecticut are doing "very badly compared to what they should be doing."

Connecticut's educators are also quite clear on what the schools need in order to improve their performance—more financial resources. By a large margin (57% to 35%), educators responding to the survey say that "the best way to improve Connecticut's schools is to provide more money for up-to-date equipment, smaller classes and increased support for kids with the greatest problems."

Frustration With the Public

Although Connecticut's educators are convinced they are on the right track, they are also intensely frustrated by lack of support from the general public. They cite a variety of reasons for the public's apathy. Many educators believe that the public is essentially complacent about education. In interviews with top leaders in education, several cited surveys showing that people are satisfied with education as it is, and hence reluctant to commit more money to the schools. As one leader said, "People feel about schools the way they feel about their political leaders. Everyone says, I hate politicians, but my state rep is ok. Same with schools." Because people are satisfied with the status quo, they see no justification for increased spending.

TABLE 1:
Educators' Evaluations of the Schools*

QUESTION: ***"Which comes closer to your own view?"***	
The schools are doing a pretty good job given the social problems and lack of funding they face.	82%
OR	
The schools use social problems and lack of funding as excuses for their poor performance.	17%
Not sure	1%
QUESTION: ***"Which comes closer to your own view?"***	
The best way to improve Connecticut's schools is to give them more money for up-to-date equipment, smaller classes and increased support for kids with the greatest problems.	57%
OR	
The best way to improve Connecticut's schools is to have greater accountability and more discipline, things that do not require more money.	35%
Not sure	8%
QUESTION: ***"Compared to when you were in school, do you think the schools are now doing a better job, a worse job, or about the same?"***	
Percentage responding "better job"	64%
QUESTION: ***"How close is the following to your view?...*** **Compared to what they should be doing, the schools in Connecticut's inner-city neighborhoods are doing very badly."**	
Percentage responding "very or somewhat close"	37%

* Totals in tables may be affected one percentage point due to rounding.

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Many educators also believe that people in Connecticut are interested only in their own local schools. Ninety-three percent of the educators surveyed said that "people in Connecticut are much more concerned with their own neighborhoods' schools than with schools in other communities." As one educational leader said, "Connecticut, a relatively small state, has 166 school boards, and there is a fierce sense of localism. People are intensely resistant to dealing with problems that transcend the narrow horizons of their own towns."

Educators also are not convinced that the public really understands the connection between a good educational system and a healthy economy. Only 43% of educators surveyed think that the public understands "that a good public education system is critical to a healthy local economy." One education leader put it this way: "What people don't realize is that these kids are tomorrow's work force. If the kids can't cut it in the workplace, the economy in this state and in the country as a whole is going to go down the tubes, and we'll all be hurting."

In particular, many educators believe that Connecticut's white and suburban citizens are insensitive to the problems of inner-city youth. Less than a third of the educators surveyed (29%) think that "people in Connecticut are committed to providing quality education to minorities on a par with what whites get," while 55% believe that "people who live in Connecticut's suburbs and small towns are mostly whites who do not want to spend money on education for minorities in the inner-cities."

TABLE 2:

Educators' Views of the Public

QUESTION: ***"How well do the following descriptions characterize the Connecticut public's views toward public education in their state?" Please use a 1 to 5 scale where 5 means you think it is a very accurate description of the public's views and 1 means you think the item is a very inaccurate description.***

Description:	Percentage Rating Item 5	Percentage Rating Item 4	Percentage Rating Item 4 or 5
People in Connecticut are much more concerned with their own neighborhoods' schools than with other communities' schools.	76%	16%	93%
People who live in Connecticut's suburbs are mostly whites who do not want to spend money for minorities in the inner-cities.	29%	26%	55%
People in Connecticut care deeply about public education.	15%	33%	48%
People in Connecticut understand that a good public education system is critical to a healthy local economy.	16%	26%	43%
People in Connecticut are committed to providing quality education to minorities on a par with what whites get.	9%	20%	29%

In private and off-the-record conversations, leaders are even more frank. Their comments often characterized the public's attitudes as short-sighted, self-interested and racist:

> "The older folks are mostly white. The kids coming along in the schools are increasingly black or Hispanic."
>
> "There is definitely an element of prejudice and racism at work. Many people just don't want bright and talented inner-city kids to compete with their own kids for jobs. They have created a system that classifies inner-city kids as people who will work in less-skilled jobs or not work at all."
>
> "Part of the problem is the greed of the '80s, that you can have everything and you don't have to pay for anything, or you can have great schools but you don't need higher taxes."

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Indeed, many educators question whether the public really cares about education at all. Less than half of the educators responding to the survey (48%) think it is completely or partially accurate to say that the Connecticut public "cares deeply" about public education.

Educators, along with community leaders interviewed for this project, privately fear that there has been a fundamental break in the traditional social contract, where each generation supports the education of the next. Again and again in the interviews, we heard educators voice variations on a single theme: the public is turning its back on the needs of children:

> "There is now a break in the social contract, because the older folks don't feel the kind of bond that they ought to feel toward the younger generation."
>
> "We have terrible problems in this state, but we haven't been able to capture the interest from the public in the lives of kids."
>
> "I can't think of a single community in this state, including the wealthiest suburbs, that hasn't cut back on educational spending in the last few years."
>
> "The public will to support education is just not there. I have seen it in my own home town. It was considered one of the best school districts in the nation, but a referendum was just defeated, and the vote wasn't even close, and the money will come from the schools. That is being repeated all over the state. There are towns that have literally defeated five or six referenda right in a row."

Frustrated teachers, interviewed in focus groups frequently complained that the public has little interest in education except when there is a sensational news story, and that people do not value education the way they use to. As a result, just when the schools need additional support to deal with increasingly complex social problems, the public is turning away.

The public is convinced that educators have abandoned many of the attitudes and practices that make education work.

Interestingly enough, the public also speaks in terms of a "broken contract." But from the public's point of view, it is the schools and parents of public school children who have broken the contract. Specifically, as we explain in the following pages, the public thinks that the schools are no longer living up to the traditional understanding of what schools ought to be doing. Consequently, it makes little sense to people to give additional support to education until the terms of this contract are restored.

There are important similarities and differences between what educators and the public say about schools and about each other. Both sides believe that the other side has somehow let them down. Educators say that the public has given up on its historic commitment to education. They think the public is no longer engaged by the problems of education and is not willing to support the solutions.

What this report shows, however, is that people in Connecticut value education and are engaged by the problems. However, they are not convinced that the solutions being offered by educators effectively address them. The public is convinced that educators—and the parents of children now in school—have abandoned many of the attitudes and practices that make education work. Until people believe that their concerns about education are being addressed—and that the schools are once again on the right track—they are unlikely to be motivated by appeals for greater financial support for the schools, or for elaborate means to overcome educational inequities.

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THE CONNECTICUT PUBLIC: "WE CARE, BUT REFORM IS ON THE WRONG TRACK"

Our findings show that Connecticut residents are by no means complacent about education. Indeed, they care deeply about education for all Connecticut children, not just the ones in their own neighborhoods, and they are concerned about the economic implications of the state's schools. Schools may be ok compared to other states, but they leave a lot to be desired.

Past surveys have shown that most people in Connecticut give their local schools ratings of good or excellent, suggesting that people are basically satisfied with what they have now. In focus groups, however, people say that although they think their schools are satisfactory compared to schools in other areas, they are deeply dissatisfied with the overall state of K-12 education.

To test this, Public Agenda first asked people to evaluate the Connecticut schools compared to other schools. Sixty-four percent say that the Connecticut schools are as good as or better than schools in other states, and 61% say that schools are doing as well as can be expected given the problems they face.

But when we asked people to evaluate schools against their image of what they *should be* doing, there was a dramatic reversal. Fifty-four percent either fully or partially agree with the statement that, "compared to what they should be doing, Connecticut's schools are doing badly." Only a fraction (16%) say the schools are doing better today than when they were in school.

African-Americans are even more likely to be frustrated with the schools than the rest of the population. Nearly six out of ten African-Americans (59%) report that the schools are worse today than when they were in school, and an equal percentage believe that the schools are doing badly compared to what they should be doing.

There is, in other words, a major disconnect between the general public's views of schools and that of educators. Only a minority of educators think that the schools are doing badly, even when compared to the ideal, and most educators think that schools are better today than in the past.

Interestingly, the community leaders surveyed for the project side with the public on this issue. Although educators overwhelmingly agree that the schools are doing a good job given the problems they face, 63% of community leaders reject this view, saying that "schools use social problems and lack of funding as excuses for their poor performance."

TABLE 3:

Evaluation of Schools: The Public, Community Leaders & Educators

	Public	Leaders	Educators
QUESTION: *"Compared to when you were in school, do you think the schools are now doing a better job, a worse job, or about the same?"*			
Percentages responding "better job"	16%	18%	64%
QUESTION: *"Which comes closer to your view?"*			
The schools are doing a pretty good job given the social problems and lack of funding they face.	(not asked)	37%	82%
OR			
The schools use social problems and lack of funding as excuses for their poor performance.	(not asked)	63%	17%
Not sure	(not asked)	0%	1%

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But the public's concerns extend beyond a generalized dissatisfaction: people have very specific complaints and a very clear sense of where schools are succeeding and where they are not. Public Agenda presented respondents with an inventory of 15 different items, including "emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable and disciplined," "increasing awareness of the contributions of women and minorities," and "teaching kids high-tech skills such as computer programs."

There are only two items where even a plurality of the Connecticut public believes that the schools do a good or excellent job: providing high pay for teachers and maintaining strong sports programs. On each of the other thirteen items, those that thought the schools were doing a good or excellent job were clearly in the minority.

Another indication that people are not complacent is the importance they assign to education for Connecticut's future. Education is at the top of the list of the public's concerns, second only to crime and well ahead of unemployment. Eighty-one percent say that education is one of the most urgent problems for the state's future.

TABLE 4:

Most Important Problems for Connecticut's Future

QUESTION: *"How important is it to address each [of the following] today in order to create a better Connecticut in the future? Is that extremely important, somewhat important, not too important, or not at all important?"*

Percentages responding "extremely important"

Item:	Whites	African-Americans	Latinos
Crime	84%	92%	94%
Public Education	78%	94%	94%
Unemployment	64%	87%	80%
Pollution	54%	61%	61%
Welfare Reform	61%	55%	60%
Campaign Finance Reform	19%	25%	19%

Again, Connecticut's African-Americans and Latinos are even more concerned. An overwhelming 94% of Connecticut's African-Americans and Latinos rate education as extremely important for the state's future. Indeed, among African-Americans and Latino residents, education is as likely as crime to be mentioned as an extremely important problem.

Supporting Ideals...Supporting Action

The Public Agenda study asked Connecticut citizens specifically about their values and ideals regarding education. Policymakers know, of course, that public support for an ideal does not directly translate into action: as one Connecticut education leader said, "There is a big gap between checking a survey box and pulling a referendum lever." But public support for an ideal should not be trivialized either: there are many public policy goals which the public does not support even in the abstract. Moreover, this study suggests that if some of the public concerns were addressed, support for an ideal could translate into support for action.

Educators' fears that the public no longer cares about education, integration or other people's children are not borne out by this study. The study shows overwhelming support for the ideal that schools in the inner-city should be just as strong as the best suburban schools. More than eight in ten (81%) Connecticut residents endorse the view that "one of our top priorities should be to give enough support to schools in minority neighborhoods

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so that they are every bit as good as schools in white neighborhoods." Indeed, support for this goal is equally high among whites and African-Americans and slightly higher among Latinos. By contrast, only 29% of educators think the public is committed to the education of minorities. The focus groups revealed that many Connecticut residents are deeply troubled by the state of inner-city schools, and they are well aware that the plight of the cities has a serious impact on the quality of their own lives—no matter how privileged and secure.

People in Connecticut also express concern for children throughout the state—not just in their own community. Most (74%) agree that "the education of kids all over the state is most important to me, because when they all do well, we all benefit." Only a minority (23%) endorses the sentiment that "the education of kids in my own community is most important to me because that's where I can make the most impact." In other words, even when people are presented with a rationale for endorsing localism, they reject it convincingly. Again, this finding contradicts the conventional wisdom of educators, who are nearly unanimous in saying that Connecticut residents care mostly about schools in their own communities.

TABLE 5:

Public's Views vs. Educators' Perceptions of Public's Views

THE PUBLIC QUESTION: ***"Which of the following comes closer to your view?"***	
The education of kids all over the state is most important to me because when they all do well we all benefit.	74%
OR	
The education of kids in my own community is most important to me because that's where I can make the most impact.	23%
Not sure/refuse	3%
EDUCATORS QUESTION: ***"How well does the following description characterize the Connecticut public's views toward public education in their state?"***	
People in Connecticut are much more concerned with their own neighborhoods' schools than with other communities' schools.	
Percentage saying "very" or "somewhat" accurate	93%
THE PUBLIC QUESTION: ***"Please tell me how close the following statement about Connecticut's public schools comes to your own view?"***	
One of our top priorities should be to give enough support to schools in minority neighborhoods so that they are every bit as good as schools in white neighborhoods.	
Percentage saying "very" or "somewhat" close	81%
EDUCATORS QUESTION: ***"How well does the following description characterize the Connecticut public's views toward public education in their state?"***	
People in Connecticut are committed to providing quality education to minorities on a par with what whites get.	
Percentage saying "very" or "somewhat" accurate	29%

The public also believes that the state of education affects Connecticut's economy. Seventy-four percent agree that employers look carefully at the "quality of local public schools" before moving to a new location. Indeed, the study even shows support—at least in the abstract—for paying more in taxes for education. Sixty-two percent say that they would be willing to pay more in taxes for public education in Connecticut. Many national surveys show similar support for providing more money for schools. These results should, however, be taken with a large grain of salt. Focus group discussions reveal that while people say they are willing to pay more, they also express concern that the extra money won't benefit the children in the classroom, but will go to other uses which they don't really define as educational, such as administration and bureaucratic overhead. What this finding really suggests is support for education as a public good—not authentic willingness to pay more taxes.

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Education, Yes, But....

If Connecticut residents are upset about the schools, if they value education and if they are concerned about children in the inner-cities, why do they continue to vote down referenda? Why are they hesitant to support specific measures to improve the educational quality of the schools and to achieve greater integration? Our research suggests that their resistance is based on a public conviction that at least four essential ingredients for good schooling are absent in Connecticut. The essential elements are: safety, parents who support their own children, education in "the basics" and discipline.

From the public's point of view, these four elements have several features in common: all are essential to a sound education and preparation for any career, schools and public school parents are doing a poor job on all of them, none requires either greater financial support or changes in which children go to what schools, and unless these priorities are addressed first, other changes will be ineffective. Spending more money on schools without addressing these four essential elements is, in the words of many of our respondents, "throwing money down a rat hole." Moreover, the absence of these essentials serves as an obstacle causing people to withhold support for increased funding, integration, and reform measures leaders may recommend.

1. Schools That Are Not Safe

It seems axiomatic to people that a public school should be a safe place for a child and it is inconceivable to them that children can be expected to learn anything in schools that are plagued by guns, drugs and gangs. The Connecticut public's most fundamental complaint is that the schools are not providing the minimal conditions of physical safety to a shocking number of children. The inventory of school performance asked people to evaluate 15 different indicators in two ways: 1) how important is each item, and 2) how good a job the schools are doing in addressing it? This technique allowed us to measure public dissatisfaction, by comparing the gap between how important an issue is and how well the schools are doing at it.

TABLE 6:

Gaps in Public's Priorities and Perception of School Performance

- Priority: Percentage rating item 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale with 5 meaning the goal should be an extremely urgent priority and 1 meaning it should be a very low priority.
- Performance: Percentage saying schools are doing an "excellent" or "good" job on goal.
- Gap: Difference between priority and performance ratings.

Goal:	Priority	Performance	Gap
Ensuring that schools are free from weapons, gangs, and drugs	81%	28%	53
Teaching kids to respect adults and people in authority	72%	26%	46
Making sure that students master the basics	81%	37%	44
Imposing stricter codes of discipline and enforcing them	69%	27%	42
Emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable, and disciplined	74%	34%	40

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"Ensuring that schools are free from weapons, gangs and drugs" leads the list of the public's concerns. Eighty-one percent give it high priority on a five-point scale, and only 28% say that the schools are doing an excellent or good job on this item. This translates into a 53-point gap between the importance of this factor and the performance of the schools—the largest gap for any item in our survey. People do not believe these problems are confined to the cities; they see violence and drugs spreading to the suburbs. Comments from the focus groups underscore this concern:

People do not believe these problems are confined to the cities; they see violence and drugs spreading to the suburbs.

"There are police and guns in school now."

"It's not like it was when we were in school; today there are guns, shootings, drugs. It sounds like a war zone."

"I hear that we have gangs in West Hartford now."

Some of the most interesting perspectives on violence in the schools came from discussions with students and parents. People closer to the schools—students, parents, teachers—tend to minimize the problem. Students from working-class and inner-city schools told us that there was violence in their schools, but that they knew how to avoid it. Their general perception was that there was plenty of opportunity to get in trouble, but that they had a great deal of control over whether to get involved or not. But even in explaining how safe they felt, the students we talked to communicated how much the threat of violence affects their daily lives. "When I am in school," one Latino student revealed, "I always stay with my cousins, and with people from my neighborhood. That way, if anybody messes with me I have protection."

The same picture emerged in interviews with parents. One group of parents from a middle-class neighborhood began the discussion by saying how pleased they were with their school, and they minimized concerns about violence. As the focus group went on, however, one parent said, "In several years at the school, my child has never used the school bathroom because of fear of other kids." Several other parents said that their children felt intimidated too. Both students and parents seem to have become desensitized to levels of risk that seem incredible to those outside the schools.

Educators frequently stress that the real trouble with violence is in the neighborhoods; comparatively speaking, school is the safest place a child can be. But this argument does not have much pull with the Connecticut public. They seem to say, "Regardless of who is at fault, I do not believe children can learn in environments where they cannot even go to a bathroom or walk down a hall alone."

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2. Parents Who Do Not Support Their Own Children

Another leading public concern is that parents do not adequately support their own children's education. Especially in focus groups of people without children in the schools, we heard repeatedly, "If the parents do not care, why should I help out the schools, and what good will it do even if I do help out?"

Nearly eight out of ten (82%) say that "parents these days are not fulfilling their responsibilities toward the education of their kids," a view that is shared in equally high percentages by African- Americans and by parents themselves. People also believe that schools cannot compensate for inadequate parental support. By margins of more than two to one (60% to 24%), the Connecticut public believes that a student from a stable family will do better at a poor school than a student from a troubled family will do at a good school.

TABLE 7:
Public's View on Importance of Parental Support

QUESTION: ***"How close does the following statement about Connecticut's public schools come to your own view?"***

	Public	African-Americans	Parents
Parents these days are not fulfilling their responsibilities toward the education of their kids.			
Percentages saying "somewhat" or "very" close	82%	80%	81%
QUESTION: ***"Which student is more likely to succeed?"***			
The student from a troubled family who goes to a good school	24%	27%	24%
OR			
The student from a stable and supportive family who goes to a poor school	60%	48%	58%
Not sure/refuse	16%	25%	17%

People believe that lack of parental support presents two problems for the schools. One is that children do not come to school "ready to learn." Comments in focus groups repeatedly captured this concern:

> "Do you give your kids breakfast before you send them to school? OK, but most of these parents today, if the schools didn't give them breakfast, the kids would have nothing to eat."

> "Today families don't pay any attention to the kids within their confines. The problems in the schools can all be attributed to family values falling apart."

The second problem, according to many Connecticut residents, is that when parents do get involved in education, they undercut the authority of the educators and their ability to provide order and effective teaching. People tend to see education as a partnership between the parent and the school. That partnership seems to have been frayed, people say, by parents who are largely indifferent to their own children, but are always ready to blame the schools if there is a problem. We heard this especially clearly in focus groups:

> "It used to be that if there was a confrontation between the student and the teacher, it was assumed that the student was wrong, and the teacher was correct. My parents always sided with the teacher, but today the teacher has no support."

> "It's the legal system. You can now sue anyone for anything. If someone looks at you funny, you can sue them."

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There is also a widespread sense that parents are either so busy with their own lives or so disinterested in educational achievement, that they do not encourage learning at home. As a result, students grow up in a world of television and video games, and parents do not make even the minimal efforts needed to support their children's learning.

In focus groups, teachers invariably brought up the issue of lack of support from parents.

In focus groups, teachers invariably brought up the issue of lack of support from parents. Nearly all told stories about parents who either seemed indifferent to their children's well-being or, worse yet, whose only response to the schools was to challenge any attempt at discipline or standard-setting. On the general lack of parental support, educators and the public are in complete agreement.

But the public and the professional educators offer somewhat different interpretations of what this lack of parental support means for the schools. Professional educators tend to say something like this: "Because the family support system has broken down, everything is left to the schools. This means that the demand for greater resources for the schools is more urgent than ever."

The general public, especially those without children, often see things a different way. Their reaction is not so much sympathy for the plight of the schools, but disgust with the whole situation. Since they believe that schools can't possibly do a good job without parental support, they don't see why they should be asked to spend more money on schools when the parents themselves don't seem to be interested.

Educators, in other words, tend to take lack of parental support as a given, and then turn to the public for greater funding for smaller classes, more teachers' aides, more guidance counselors and support programs and higher pay for over-stressed teachers. The public, for its part, tends to look at the school-parent community as a system. If a crucial element isn't working, it is hard to convince the public that they should devote more resources to a system which seems to be malfunctioning. The public might concede, in other words, that this problem is not caused by the schools themselves, but they are not convinced that the schools can overcome the problem with more money.

3. Too Little Attention to "The Basics"

In focus groups, Connecticut residents recognized that lack of parental support and problems with violence, gangs and drugs cannot be blamed completely on the schools. While the public may fault the schools for their handling of these issues, most people do not believe that the schools themselves created these problems.

When it comes to the failure to teach the basics, however, the public seems more ready to blame educators directly. In focus groups people stated clearly that, at a minimum, they expect high school graduates to be able to read and write simple English sentences and perform simple arithmetic operations without a calculator. Nearly everyone told a "horror story" about Connecticut high school graduates who cannot read, speak or make change correctly.

> "These kids don't know who the President and the Vice President are. They don't know what the state capitals are, or where the states are. The kids don't even know where the hell this state is. They couldn't find it on a map."

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"Kids can't make change. At the supermarkets, they don't even have to hit the keys, the machine tells them everything."

"My daughter brings me a permission slip to sign every day. They are going to the nature center. They are going to a fair. They are going to meet some Indian. I don't know when she is in school to actually learn anything."

"In my job, I work with younger people, and they give me written work which I am supposed to type. I didn't go to college, but what I see coming from these people is probably about 8th-grade level, as far as spelling and sentence construction goes."

The survey also captures these concerns. Eighty-one percent of the public think that the basics should have high priority, but only 37% think the schools are doing a good or excellent job in this area. In other words, there is a 44-point gap between the importance of this educational task and how well the schools are doing. (See Table 6-page 15)

The public strongly supports virtually anything that might help improve students' mastery of basic skills. A staggering 94% believe that kids should not be allowed to graduate from high school unless they clearly demonstrate that they can write and speak English. Support for this kind of policy is also extremely high among Latinos (84%). Ninety percent say students should not be promoted unless they pass a test showing that they have reached the standards for that grade. As one person said, "We cannot just pass kids along. There is nothing wrong with repeating a class."

TABLE 8:

Public Support for Emphasis on Academic Basics

QUESTION: ***"Please tell me if you strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose [each of these ideas] for changing the way schools teach."***

Percentages responding "strongly favor" or "somewhat favor"

Idea:	General Public	Latinos	Parents
Not allowing kids to graduate from high school unless they clearly demonstrate they can write and speak English well.	94%	84%	94%
Raising the standards of promotion for students and only letting them move ahead when they pass a test showing they have reached those standards.	90%	86%	91%

Not only do Connecticut residents want students to learn basic skills, they would prefer that educators also use traditional, tried-and-true teaching techniques. Eighty-one percent, for example, say that "kids should memorize the multiplication tables and do math by hand before they go on to use calculators and computers. Otherwise they will never really understand math concepts." This is in complete opposition to the views of Connecticut educators; 54% of educators surveyed believe that kids should use calculators and computers from the start, and only 35% think that students should learn hand calculation first. Once again, the community leaders tend to side with the public on this issue. People also seem to want more traditional teaching methods when it comes to issues of grammar. This issue came up repeatedly in focus groups:

"I read recently that in Hartford, they want to drop spelling from the curriculum."

"I have a twelve-year old grandson—he's in accelerated classes—but if he didn't have a spell-proofer on his computer, he'd misspell a lot of words."

"I wonder where they plan for these kids to go when they get out of there. If they can't hold an English conversation, where are they going with their good grades?"

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Another educational reform idea greeted skeptically by the public is the notion that students of different abilities can learn together and from each other in the same class. Fifty-nine percent of educators surveyed, for example, believe that schools should "mix fast learners and slow learners so that slower kids learn from faster kids." This idea makes little sense to community leaders or the general public. Only 35% of community leaders favor this proposal. Other studies show that an even smaller percentage of the general public supports it.

TABLE 9:

The Public and Community Leaders Vs. Educators on New Teaching Methodologies

QUESTION: ***"Which comes closest to your own view about how public schools should teach math?"***

	Public	Leaders	Educators
Kids who use calculators and computers from the start learn to understand math concepts even better than those who spend a lot of time memorizing tables and doing math by hand.	13%	21%	54%
OR			
Kids should memorize the multiplication tables and learn to do math by hand before they go on to use calculators and computers. Otherwise they will never really understand math concepts.	81%	65%	35%
Not sure	6%*	15%	12%
QUESTION: ***"Do you think that mixing fast learners and slow learners in the same class so that slower kids learn from faster kids would improve academic achievement?"***			
Percentage saying "strongly" or "somewhat" favor.	27%**	35%	59%

* Total volunteered responses for "neither," "both," "not sure" and "refused."

** This result is taken from *First Things First: What Americans Expect From The Public Schools*, a recent Public Agenda study. The finding is based on the views of citizens in the northeastern part of the US, rather than Connecticut alone. It reflects the percentage saying the proposal would improve academic achievement.

For a large number of Connecticut residents, then, the schools are failing their most important assignment: teaching children the most basic elements of language, general knowledge and computation. Both the survey findings and the focus groups suggest that, in the public's view, some of this failure can be attributed to teaching methods that do not make sense and do not appear to be working.

Not surprisingly, many educators disagree with this indictment. Teachers generally rebel at what they perceive to be an over-emphasis on the "old-fashioned" basics. Their perspective is that, in today's complex society, students need to do more than memorize facts and rules. Comments from focus groups conducted with teachers underscore this distinction:

> "If you want to know what not to do in school, try teaching the way we were taught. It kills."
>
> "I think it is much more important for students to acquire critical thinking skills than to commit lots of stuff to memory that they will never use."
>
> "I spent the semester teaching social studies by doing simulation games, and I used the books as resources. The students left them in the room and never took them home. I got criticized for not teaching to the textbook."

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But the Connecticut public does not buy the teachers' arguments. They do not understand how a child who cannot locate Connecticut on a map is ready to apply critical thinking skills. If the new methods were producing higher test scores and more educated young people, the public might be convinced. What they see now, however, are methods they do not understand and kids who seem uneducated.

4. Not Enough Discipline, Respect For Authority or Sound Work Habits

Huge majorities of the Connecticut public also fault the schools for not teaching fundamental rules of society: discipline, respect for authority and satisfactory work habits (such as punctuality and dependability). Again, all three of these indicators are at the top of the list of the public's priorities for education, and at the bottom of the list in the public's assessment of how well the schools are doing. Seventy-two percent think teaching youngsters to respect authority should be a top priority, but only 26% give schools a good rating here. Seventy-four percent think the schools should stress work habits, but only 34% say they are doing this effectively. Sixty-nine percent think the schools should make discipline an urgent priority but only 27% say schools are doing a good job in this area. (See Table 6-page 15) Approximately 60% to 70% of the public think that the schools are doing a "fair" or "poor" job of addressing these issues.

In focus groups, citizens elaborated on these issues. First, they expect children to display at least a minimum sense of propriety in language and comportment. And they expect schools to exert a reasonable amount of control over the students. People also think it is important for children to realize that actions have consequences, and that good actions will be rewarded and bad ones punished. Moreover, Connecticut citizens think that disruptive children should not be allowed to spoil the education of those who do want to learn.

People also think it is important for children to realize that actions have consequences.

When people look at the schools, they are not convinced that the discipline and order needed for teachers to teach and children to learn are in place. Instead, people see a school system that seems to have no control over where students go during the school day. People constantly remark that kids seem to be wandering off campus during the day, smoking cigarettes and skipping classes. Similarly, people complain that educators do not seem able or willing to enforce the rules. As a result, misbehaving children frequently ruin the educational experience of motivated learners. In the focus groups, nearly everyone had an example to talk about:

> "Our Rotary Club honored some special students in the local high school. We had 30 boys and girls at this big dinner. Probably 50% of the boys in attendance had baseball hats on. It was at a formal sit-down dinner. All of us were dressed nicely. The superintendent of the schools said, 'Gee, I didn't even notice that.' The students feel they can do anything they want. If they don't get properly disciplined or guided, how can they be educated?"

> "If a kid perpetrates a crime in the school—carrying or selling drugs—the kid is suspended from school, but then they send a private tutor to the child's house. What is the message we are sending to this kid? A child who has done something wrong gets the message that nothing will happen to him."

> "My daughter is in high school and she is pregnant. I'm sorry, but I don't think she should be allowed to go to classes and go to the school dance. It isn't fair to the girls who aren't pregnant. They threw me out of school when I was pregnant."

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Not surprisingly, Connecticut citizens strongly favor measures designed to bring more discipline to the schools. Ninety-seven percent say that schools should emphasize work habits such as being on time; 86% think that schools should take persistent troublemakers out of class and 83% say students should be required to stay on school grounds during school hours. One citizen characterized the lack of discipline in schools with this comment, "I drove by the school the other day, and there was a whole bunch of kids outside. I didn't know whether school was over early or whether they were just out there. They are smoking, and they are into everything. You don't know where your kids are; they have no control."

TABLE 10:

Public Support for Measures That Stress Discipline

QUESTION: *"Please tell me if you favor or oppose each of these ideas for changing the way schools teach."*

Idea:	"Strongly Favor"	"Somewhat Favor"	Total Favor
Emphasizing such work habits as being on time, dependable and disciplined	81%	15%	97%
Taking persistent trouble-makers out of class	64%	22%	86%
Requiring kids to stay on school grounds throughout the day	63%	20%	83%

For most people in Connecticut, the problem is not that the schools do not do anything right; it is that they are failing in areas that matter most. People give schools high ratings on providing high pay for teachers, maintaining strong sports programs, having buildings that are modern and well-maintained, increasing student awareness of the contributions of women and minorities and using the latest teaching techniques. But these areas are relatively unimportant to most people.

TABLE 11:

Areas Where Public's Educational Priorities Matches Perception of School Performance

- Priority: Percentage rating item 6 or 7 on a 7-point scale with 7 meaning the goal should be an extremely urgent priority and 1 meaning it should be a very low priority.
- Performance: Percentage saying "schools are doing an excellent or good job accomplishing goal."
- Gap: Difference Between Priority and Performance Ratings.

Goal:	Priority	Performance	Gap (one-)
Increasing teachers pay	30%	48%	-18
Maintaining a strong sports program	53%	57%	-4
Having school buildings that are modern and well kept	57%	44%	+13
Increasing student awareness of the contributions women and minorities have made to American society	53%	37%	+16
Using the latest teaching methods	58%	41%	+17

"Don't Ask For More Money Until You Get Your House In Order"

The problems of unsafe schools, lack of parental support, inadequate discipline, and inattention to the basics have the following in common: the public does not believe that these problems will be solved with more money. In fact, until these more fundamental problems are solved, the public thinks that giving more money to the schools would be wasteful. (There are important differences between whites and African-Americans on some of these issues, which we explore in the next section.)

The study asked respondents to choose between two alternatives: "The best way to improve Connecticut's schools is to give them more money for up-to-date equipment, smaller classes and increased support for kids with the greatest problems," or "The best way to improve Connecticut's schools is to have greater accountability and more discipline—things that do not require additional money."

By a margin of two to one (57% to 29%) Connecticut residents favor the notion of greater discipline and accountability for the schools as opposed to giving the schools more money. This is completely in opposition to the views of educators, who, by an equally wide margin in the other direction, think that what the schools need is more money. On this issue, community leaders side with the public against the educators. Older people are even more likely to favor (62%) more accountability and discipline (without money) than the general public. Parents are somewhat less likely to support (48%) this approach.

TABLE 12:

Public, Leaders and Educators on Best Way to Improve Schools

QUESTION: *"Which comes closer to your own view?"*

	Public	Leaders	Educators
The best way to improve Connecticut's schools is to give them more money for up-to-date equipment, smaller classes and increased support for kids with the greatest problems.	29%	29%	57%
OR The best way to improve Connecticut's schools is to have greater accountability and more discipline—things that do not require additional money.	57%	62%	35%
Not sure	14%*	9%	8%

* Total is volunteered responses for "neither," "both," "not sure" and "refused."

The public's assessment of the schools is buttressed by their perception of Catholic schools. Many Connecticut residents believe that Catholic schools are more successful. By margins of nearly three to one (62% to 21%), people say that parochial schools get better results than public schools in Connecticut. About two-thirds (63%) of those who believe that parochial schools do a better job say this is because their "approach to educating their students is more effective." The remainder say that Catholic schools do better because they are more selective about which students they teach.

In focus groups, parochial schools get high marks because they provide greater safety and emphasize the basics. There is also a belief that parents who are willing to pay more for their children's education may be more supportive of the schools. African-Americans are even more likely to say Catholic schools provide better education than the rest of the population; 70% hold this view.

These results reveal another disagreement between educators and the public. Public school educators are willing to agree that parochial schools get better results, but they are unwilling to concede that the difference may be due to a superior educational approach. By a large margin, educators surveyed say that parochial schools succeed because they are more selective about the students they accept. Educators believe that the only reason parochial schools do better is because they do not have to deal with the most troublesome students.

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In focus groups, the public says the greater selectivity of parochial schools is a strength, not a weakness. In fact, a large majority of Connecticut residents (86%) say public schools should also find ways to remove persistent troublemakers from classes.

> "There has to be segregation, not by race, but for problem students. They have to be pulled out and placed in special classes. The trend today is to mainstream them, and the teachers spend more time with the problems."

> "The private schools do very well. They do the basics. They produce a better citizen and a smarter student."

The parochial schools, in other words, provide evidence for many people that education can work. The difference is not more money, but better teaching methods and a willingness to prevent troublemakers from spoiling school for everyone else.

"We've Been Burned Before"

Many of the public attitudes described above are prevalent, in one way or another, in other states and nationwide. But one specific event in Connecticut's recent history has exacerbated the public's dissatisfaction with the state's schools. In the mid-1980s, educators convinced the public and the state legislature that educational reform was desperately needed, and that one key problem was inadequate salaries for teachers. As a result, the state dramatically increased teachers' salaries. By some measures, Connecticut teachers are now the best paid in the country.

In the public's view, however, increasing teachers' salaries has not paid off. Only 20% believe that higher teacher pay has improved the quality of education in the state; while 65% say that raises have done very little to improve education. By contrast, 44% of educators surveyed say that pay raises have improved education.

This bit of recent educational history has further reinforced the belief of many Connecticut residents that more money for the schools is not the answer—that the schools are not spending the money they already have wisely. Eighty percent report that, "With all the tax money they get, Connecticut's public schools should be getting much better results."

The study also found a widespread belief that teachers' salaries should be tied to their performance—their success in getting kids to learn. Fifty-five percent of the public favor the proposal to reward educators when their students improve and penalize them when their students fail to learn.

TABLE 13:

Impact of Pay Raises on Quality of Education: Public, Leaders, Educators

QUESTION: ***"Overall, would you say that higher teacher salaries have...?"***

	Public	Leaders	Educators
Substantially improved education in the state OR	20%	11%	44%
Have done very little to improve education in the state	65%	70%	28%
Not sure	15%	20%	28%

Again, educators see the situation differently. They tend to feel that they are blamed for social problems that are not their fault. Sixty-two percent say "schools and teachers are already taking too much blame for problems over which they have no control." Community leaders dramatically disagree. By a wide margin (67% to 27%), they reject that view and say instead that "schools and teachers should accept more responsibility for the performance of their students."

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In focus groups, people invariably couple concerns about teachers' salaries with complaints about teachers' unions and tenure. While everyone concedes that there are many good teachers, there is also a perception that bad teachers cannot be fired and that most teachers are not accountable to anyone.

> "I went to a town meeting and asked if the teachers expected to get $60,000 a year to teach classes of 12. I said, 'Are the children that bad?' And they said, 'yes.' I said, 'Then shame on you, on me, and on the parents.' They booed me. I don't think we are getting too much return from our money. The quality is not there. They work a short year, and they just expect the pay they are getting with no return. It angers me."

> "The state has tried paying the teachers more to get better quality, but it hasn't worked."

> "School administrators are held hostage, because they can't get rid of the teachers, not in this state. Show me where they have gotten rid of a teacher. Yet with all these teachers you are telling me there is not one who is no good. They are downsizing industry, maybe they should downsize the teachers. Our teachers will not have after hours sessions with parents. Can you believe it?"

> "Why should we pay for it? Why can't the teachers take a little less and do more for the kids? They are holding a big clout over all of us. The teachers and all of their families and their relatives vote for their pay raises. If they could really teach those kids by working only from 9 to 3 for nine months a year, at $60,000, I would be happy to give it to them."

Although 59% of educators surveyed think teachers' unions are a positive force for Connecticut education, a strong majority of community leaders surveyed (71%) see them as a negative. For community leaders, the schools need a fundamental overhaul. Until that happens, more funding will not help.

TABLE 14:
Educators vs. Leaders on Accountability and Unions

QUESTION: *"Which of the following comes closer to your own view?"*

	Leaders	Educators
Schools and teachers should accept more responsibility for the performance of their students.	67%	35%
OR		
Schools and teachers are already taking too much blame for problems over which they have no control.	27%	62%
Not sure	6%	4%
Teachers' unions are largely a positive force in education in Connecticut.	16%	59%
OR		
Teachers' unions are largely a negative force in education in Connecticut.	71%	36%
Not sure	14%	6%
More money would probably help Connecticut's schools get better results.	26%	64%
OR		
Until Connecticut's schools are fundamentally overhauled more money would probably be wasted.	65%	21%
Not sure	10%	16%

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Public Support For the Concept of Public Education

Despite their criticisms of the current state of Connecticut education, people are not willing to walk away from the public schools. This study suggests that people want to work within the framework of public education. We presented two solutions— vouchers and privatization—which invite people to reject the public school concept. Both of these approaches have been seriously discussed in Connecticut. In fact, during the preparation of this report, the Hartford School district reached an agreement to engage a private company to take a role in running its schools. Both measures are almost unanimously opposed by Connecticut's educators.

Only a third of Connecticut's public believes that giving parents vouchers, which they could use at private schools, would improve public schools by forcing them to compete with private schools. There is even less support for privatization. Only 24% think that the state should "rely on private companies to run the most troubled school districts because these districts have had long histories of poor performance." Most people (57%) think that private companies will "care more about profits than about the education of children." Interestingly, the public—including white and minority parents—agrees with the educators on this point.

Privatization is one area where educators and the public agree, but community leaders differ. As we have seen, on most items, the community leaders side with the public and the educators have a different view. But the issue of privatization presents a different picture. Community leaders in Connecticut are evenly divided on privatization, with 32% in favor and 35% opposed, and a roughly equal number who are undecided. Clearly Connecticut's community leaders are a more receptive market for the notion that private industry can do a better job of running the schools.

TABLE 15:

Vouchers & Privatization: Educators, Leaders, Whites, African-Americans

QUESTION: *"Do you think that vouchers would...?"*

Item:	Leaders	Educators	Whites	African-Americans
Improve the public schools by forcing them to compete with private schools for students	33%	13%	33%	32%
OR				
Worsen the public schools because private schools would take better students and leave the public school	48%	73%	51%	49%
Not Sure	19%	14%	15%*	19%*

QUESTION: *"Which of the following comes closer to your view?"*

Item:	Leaders	Educators	Whites	African-Americans
Connecticut should rely on private companies to run the most troubled school districts because these districts have had long histories of poor performance.	32%	8%	24%	24%
OR				
Connecticut should not rely at all on private companies to run any of its schools because such companies care more about profits than about the education of children.	35%	81%	57%	58%
Not Sure	34%	11%	19%*	18%*

* Total volunteered responses for "neither," "both," "not sure" and "refused."

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SPECIAL FOCUS: VIEWS ON INTEGRATION

Our survey of Connecticut residents included an "oversample" of 200 minority group members. This allowed us to make comparisons between the views of African-Americans, Latinos and whites on a number of educational issues. On most issues, we found that African-Americans' and Latinos' attitudes about the schools are similar to the views of the general public. All three groups are concerned about education and believe that it is important to the future of the state. All agree that the schools are underperforming in many ways. Respondents from all groups are troubled by violence, crime and drugs in the schools and criticize the schools for failing to teach children respect for authority and the basics.

TABLE 16:

Gaps Between African-Americans' Educational Priorities and Perceptions of School Performance

- Priority: Percentage of African-Americans rating item 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale with 5 meaning the goal should be an extremely urgent priority and 1 meaning it should be a very low priority.
- Performance: Percentage of African-Americans saying "schools are doing an excellent or good job accomplishing goal."
- Gap: Difference Between Priority and Performance Ratings

Goal:	Priority	Performance	Gap
Ensuring that schools are free from weapons, gangs, and drugs	82%	32%	50
Making sure that students master the basics	82%	37%	45
Educating kids to be more tolerant of people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds	79%	30%	49
Providing more education on social problems such as teen pregnancy, drug abuse, and AIDS	79%	30%	49
Teaching kids to respect adults and people in authority	77%	25%	52
Strengthening students' self-esteem	72%	35%	37

In general, African-Americans have the same concerns about the schools as whites, but they also add a few items of concern to their list. Specifically, they are much more likely to identify "teaching tolerance" as a goal for the schools, and less likely to be convinced that the schools are doing a good job of it. African-Americans place more emphasis on education about problems such as teen pregnancy, drug abuse and AIDS, and they are more concerned that the schools are failing to strengthen students' self-esteem. For African-Americans, these factors rank high on the list of priorities, but they don't think the schools are doing an adequate job on them.

Both African-Americans and whites endorse integration as a goal and as a value. Sixty-seven percent of whites and a much higher percentage of African-Americans (87%), think it is either very important or somewhat important to integrate the schools. On this and on many other issues, responses of Latino residents fall between those of African-Americans and whites; 81% of Latinos endorse racial integration as a goal.

TABLE 17:

Reasons For Poor Academic Performance of Inner-City Students

QUESTION: *"I'm going to mention some of the reasons [people have given] for why Connecticut's inner-city students generally do not do as well in schools as students from other areas in the state. I'd like you to tell me if the reason is very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not important at all."*

Percentages responding "very important"	African-Americans	Whites	Inner-City Residents
Inner-city schools are beset by the crime and drugs in their communities	77%	70%	74%
Inner-city schools have to deal with too many students who come from unstable or troubled families	75%	66%	72%
The parents of inner-city kids are often less involved in their children's education than other parents	74%	63%	67%

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There is agreement among African-Americans and whites on the most serious problems affecting inner-city schools. When asked to name the most important reason why inner-city students do not do as well as students from elsewhere, 70% of whites and 77% of African-Americans attributed their difficulties to "crime and drugs in their communities." Almost as many referred to the large number of students from unstable or troubled families or said that inner-city parents are less involved in their children's education. As Table 17 shows, these criticisms are even more widely endorsed by African-Americans than by whites.

African-Americans and whites differ, however, on factors more directly associated with the schools. African-Americans place greater blame on inferior teachers and lower levels of funding, as well as racial discrimination itself. Fifty-nine percent of African- Americans think that a very important factor in the poor performance of inner-city students is that inner-city teachers have low expectations of their students and do not demand good work. Only 39% of whites agree. Equally high percentages of African-Americans (58%) say that the best teachers avoid teaching in the inner-city schools, whereas only 42% of whites share this concern. Once again, Latino attitudes tend to fall between those of whites and African-Americans. The following comments, all made by African-American parents in focus groups, highlight problems they see specifically in the schools their children attend:

TABLE 18:

Reasons For Academic Performance of Inner-City Students

QUESTION: *"I'm going to mention some of the reasons [people have given] for why Connecticut's inner-city students generally do not do as well in school as students from other areas in the state. I'd like you to tell me if the reason is very important, somewhat important, not too important, or not important at all."*

Percentages responding "very important"	African-Americans	Latinos	Whites
Inner-city schools have much less money to spend per student than wealthier areas in Connecticut	69%	53%	41%
Many inner-city teachers have such low expectations for their students that they don't demand good work	59%	43%	39%
Connecticut's best teachers avoid teaching in the inner-city schools	58%	51%	42%
Racial discrimination prevents inner-city kids from doing well	53%	48%	26%

"The kids are missing out because the teachers don't care, and they are passing them on even though they haven't learned anything."

"One teacher said, 'I've got my education, all I am here for is the paycheck.'"

"They are not teaching the children, they don't care about the children."

"Go to one of the suburban elementary schools and then compare it to the schools here. Here they are learning out of a book that was written maybe in the 1970s. In the suburbs they will have the latest, most up-to-date book."

"The schools in this neighborhood don't have the things that they do in the suburbs."

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Since African-Americans and whites have somewhat different diagnoses of the causes of inner-city school problems, it is not surprising that they also disagree on the appropriate solutions.

In Connecticut, as well as in other states with inner-city schools, recommended solutions often involve two elements. On the one hand, leaders (and the courts) frequently propose schemes to integrate the schools. Another approach is to invest resources in the inner-city schools to bring them up to a higher level. The majority of white Connecticut residents, at the moment, are not very sympathetic to either of those approaches.

Most whites have the same attitude about inner-city schools as they do about schools in general—namely that the real problems are not financial in nature.

For instance, nearly two thirds (62%) of white residents say, "Instead of spending limited resources on integrating Connecticut's public schools, the schools would be better off fixing up and improving the schools that kids attend now." Less than a third (27%) think that "Connecticut's public schools should take concrete and immediate steps to integrate so that white children and minority children are assured of an equal quality education." White residents are basically divided over the question of whether integration will improve learning. While 32% of whites agree that "most students will learn better in integrated schools," 33% disagree. An even larger number (35%) neither agree nor disagree with this statement.

We also asked white Connecticut residents whether the state should invest more money in the inner-city schools to bring them up to the standards of the suburban schools. Most whites have the same attitude about inner-city schools as they do about schools in general—namely that the real problems are not financial in nature. By a two-to-one margin (60% to 29%) whites say that "Connecticut's inner-city schools already get a lot of money and this has led to little improvement. More money is not the answer." They reject the proposition that "Connecticut's inner-city schools need much more money than they have gotten in the past. The problems they face could be reduced substantially with more money." In focus groups, people agonize over the problems of the inner-city, but they are convinced that there is nothing they themselves can do to help solve them. Their comments reflect those feelings:

> "Even though helping Hartford is the right thing to do, I wouldn't do anything for them. We threw money at the problem—tons of money—and it didn't solve the problem. We could throw money at them forever, and it wouldn't solve the problem."
>
> "We have overpaid our share. We have been giving them money for 25 years, and what do we have? Hoodlums, who will rip you off. Now we have alarm systems. You can't go out."
>
> "In Hartford, they let their systems run down, so now you won't get a very good class of teachers. Busing doesn't do any good. Take a look at Massachusetts."
>
> "I think it is a sinking ship down there. You ought to leave it alone. When I see something positive developing there, then I will be willing to help them."

The study presented white respondents with a range of possible integration measures. We asked people to assume that the state was implementing an integration program, and asked them which measures would be most and least acceptable. Not surprisingly, people favor voluntary measures and greater resources for inner-city schools ahead of busing and regionalization. But there is a reluctance to endorse any of these solutions, because, in the eyes of many people, they do not address the real problem, which is the dysfunction of the inner-city itself.

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African-Americans Want More Interventions

As we have seen, African-Americans and whites alike believe that the inner-city environment—with its high level of crime, drugs and unstable families—is a major reason for the poor performance of inner-city students. But African-Americans are more likely to go beyond these environmental factors to explain poor student performance. For instance, African-Americans also say that schools are under-funded. They say that the best teachers avoid inner-city schools and those who do teach there do not demand good work from their students. (See Table 18-page 28)

African-Americans say that the best teachers avoid inner-city schools and those who do teach there do not demand good work from their students.

Not surprisingly, African-Americans have a different view about what the state should do to alleviate some of the problems. They are much more evenly divided over whether it is preferable to fix existing schools or to move children beyond schools in their own communities. Roughly half of African-Americans (51%) say that it is more important to improve the schools kids attend now than it is to integrate the schools, compared to 62% of whites who believe this.

African-Americans are also much more inclined to support traditional integration measures such as busing. If the state does implement a desegregation plan, 68% of African-Americans favor busing, while only 28% oppose it. Whites narrowly oppose busing as part of a mandated integration plan, by margins of 50% to 45%.

African-Americans are more supportive of funding measures for inner-city schools. Eighty-two percent of African-Americans favor "strongly increasing funding for inner-city schools" as a way to implement a desegregation plan, compared to 71% of whites.

Nevertheless, there is real ambivalence in the African-American community about whether money is the answer. A plurality of African-Americans (46%) say that inner-city schools could improve significantly with more money, but 37% agree that money in the past has led to little improvement and more money is not the answer. Whites endorse this latter view by margins of two to one.

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AFTERWORD

Deborah Wadsworth
Executive Director, Public Agenda

In the last few months, Public Agenda has had the opportunity to explore Americans' attitudes about many aspects of education reform. No study, however, has more graphically captured public disillusionment with reform than this project for the Memorial Fund.

For many observers, Connecticut is a case study in promises unmet. It has some of the country's finest schools, some of its wealthiest communities, and some of its thorniest educational problems. As we began our work, we were aware that earlier this year a sweeping educational reform agenda had succumbed to political disarray, lack of clarity, and the unlikely coalition of teachers' unions and affluent parents. We also observed a statewide effort to identify voluntary measures to correct inequities between white and minority children. Many of the Connecticut leaders we interviewed believe the state is at an impasse — held captive by public apathy and the lack of political will to improve the schools.

But, as is so often the case, listening carefully to the "general public" offered a somewhat different perspective — one marked by frustration rather than apathy. In focus groups across the state — and in our statewide telephone survey — we listened to citizens who valued education strongly and were painfully aware of the state's problems. They understood — unquestionably — that deteriorating inner-city schools jeopardize quality of life throughout the state. People had no doubts that despair in the cities will — through crime and taxation — seep into even the most affluent suburbs. But, despite their clarity on these points, they resisted calls for more funds and opposed many of the "reforms" educators have put forward.

We have attempted here to explain what accounts for this disparity and why people reject their leaders' initiatives. As you have read, we found citizens throughout the state, in every walk of life, who believe that those running the schools are neglecting the fundamentals. And they are convinced that addressing these basic, fundamental issues is not a matter of giving schools more money. From their perspective, citizens in Connecticut have accepted tax increases in the past; they have seen their teachers become among the highest paid in the nation; and they have watched their schools get worse.

To many, the public schools display a flagrant disregard to common sense. It seems axiomatic to people that schools should be a safe place for children to be, but they aren't. They believe children learn best when good behavior is rewarded and uncooperative behavior is punished, but they see very little evidence that this is the case in the schools. They expect all children to master the basics — elementary rules of grammar and spelling, simple math without a calculator, a rudimentary sense of history and geography. They wonder what is happening as children progress through twelve years of public schooling.

The public perspective captured by the Graustein study is sobering. We trust it will be taken seriously. For whether it is factually accurate or contaminated by misconception, it would be a mistake of the first order for educational leaders in Connecticut (or elsewhere) to ignore it.

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METHODOLOGY

This study of attitudes toward public education in Connecticut is based on a telephone survey of 1,203 randomly selected Connecticut residents and a mail survey of Connecticut educators and community leaders. Public Agenda also conducted individual interviews with education policy leaders in Connecticut, and focus groups with teachers, parents, students, and adults without school-age children.

Telephone Survey

Telephone interviews, averaging about 27 minutes in length, were conducted with 1,203 randomly sampled Connecticut residents over the age of 18. The 1,203 total interviews were comprised of 803 randomly selected members of the general public and two "oversamples": one oversample consisted of 200 randomly selected members of minority groups (i.e., non-white respondents) and the other oversample was made up of 200 randomly selected parents with children in the Connecticut public schools. The survey has a sampling error of plus or minus 3.4 percentage points for the 803 members of the general public. As in all surveys, sampling error for subgroups will be somewhat higher, and non-sampling sources of error, such as question-order effects, can sometimes affect results.

Public Agenda designed the survey questionnaire and contracted RSVP Research Services of Philadelphia to provide the sample, execute the interviews and tabulate the results. Respondents were selected through random-digit dialing techniques whereby every household in Connecticut, including those with unlisted numbers, had an equal chance of being contacted. The interviews with the 803 members of the general public took place between August 30th and September 8th, 1994; the oversamples were conducted between August 8th and 14th. Respondents had the option of being interviewed in Spanish, and 35 such interviews took place.

Mail Survey

A questionnaire, comparable to the telephone survey of the public, was mailed to 450 Connecticut educators and 585 Connecticut community leaders in August, 1994. The educator sample was made up of 300 public school teachers, 100 principals, and 50 superintendents and assistant superintendents. The leadership sample consisted of 200 economic leaders (corporate CEO's and personnel directors, small business owners, and union leaders), 217 political leaders (state legislators—including 17 members of the Black and Puerto Rican legislative caucus—and mayors), and 168 civic leaders (newspaper editors, religious leaders, and 18 members of Connecticut branches of the NAACP). The mailing resulted in 80 completed surveys by educators (an 18% response rate) and 105 completed surveys by community leaders (also an 18% response rate).

Leadership Interviews

A series of one-to-one interviews was conducted between May 23 and June 28, 1994 with 14 of Connecticut's education policy leaders. Interviewees were identified with the help of the Graustein Memorial Fund. (See the Appendix for a complete list of interviewees.)

Focus Groups

In total, 12 focus groups were conducted in North Haven, Weathersfield, Danbury, Windsor and Westport between May 23 and June 7, 1994. These groups were composed as follows:

Three teachers groups—one each from inner-city, working-class, and suburban schools

Three parents groups—one each of African-American, working-class, and suburban parents, all with children in public school

Four students groups—comprised of African-American, Latino, working-class neighborhood and suburban neighborhood students

Two groups of citizens without school-age children—one with older and one with younger participants

Focus groups participants were recruited by independent Connecticut-based research organizations according to Public Agenda's specifications, and all focus groups were recorded for later review. The groups were moderated by John Immerwahr, with the exception of the two African-American groups, which were conducted by an African-American moderator, Professor Teresa Nance of Villanova University.

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APPENDIX

List of Connecticut leaders interviewed for this report.
All interviews were conducted between May 23 and June 28, 1994.

Gordon Bruno
Former Superintendent of Schools
Meriden

David E. Carson
Chief Executive Officer
Peoples Bank, Bridgeport

Terry Cassidy
Executive Director
Connecticut Association of Boards of Education

Marcial Cuevas
Vice Chairman, Connecticut State Board of Education
Chairman, Vocational and Technical Education Committee

John DeStefano, Jr.
Mayor
New Haven

Vincent L. Ferrandino
Former Commissioner of Education

Bob Frahm
Education Writer
Hartford Courant

Jack Hasegawa
Education Consultant
Connecticut State Department of Education

Conrad Mallett
President
Capital Community Technical College

Reggie Mayo
Superintendent of Schools
New Haven

Lauchlin H. McLean
Member
Connecticut State Legislative Committee of AARP

Tim Moynihan
President
Greater Hartford Chamber of Commerce

George Springer
President
Connecticut State Federation of Teachers

Senator Kevin Sullivan
Chair
Connecticut General Assembly
Joint Committee on Education

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of people were instrumental in helping with this research:

David M. Nee of the Graustein Memorial Fund trusted us to conduct this project, freely shared his insights on education in Connecticut, and was instrumental in helping us make contact with many of the state's educational leaders.

Lynn Jenkins of the Memorial Fund was also of great assistance in helping us with many of the necessary logistics.

Dr. Teresa Nance of Villanova University conducted the focus groups of African-American respondents and advised us on interpreting the findings of those groups.

Steve Farkas and Greg Shaw designed the survey questionnaire and contributed their expertise and professionalism to every phase of the research.

Judy Kallick Russell organized the logistics of the focus groups and interviews. Her patience and attention to detail were especially appreciated by everyone on the research staff.

Nancy Hom formatted the report, and contributed both a meticulous attention to layout and an unflappable good humor even in difficult situations.

Adam Kernan-Schloss gave us his usual good editorial advice and also editted and tightened our original draft.

Finally, we are grateful to our colleagues *Jean Johnson and Deborah Wadsworth*, whose intelligence and sound judgment guided this project at every point.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Immerwahr is a Senior Research Fellow of the Public Agenda and the Chair of the Department of Philosophy at Villanova University. He is a co-author of *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools, The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System, Crosstalk: The Public, The Experts and Competitiveness* and numerous other reports and articles.

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RELATED PUBLICATIONS

**** First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools, 1994***

Based on the findings from a national study of the views of over 1,100 members of the general public, including 550 parents of children currently in public school, this report examines public attitudes toward values issues in the schools as well as attitudes toward many education reform efforts. In addition to reporting findings from the general public, the study offers detailed analyses of the views of white and African-American parents, as well as parents identified as traditional Christians. In essence, the study is a report card from the public on the education reform movement. Copies are available from Public Agenda for $10.00.

Contested Values: Tug-Of-War In the School Yard, 1994

Prepared by Public Agenda for the National Issues Forums, this citizen discussion guide focuses on the debate over which values American children should be taught in public schools. Written for the general reader, the guide lays out pro and con arguments for having schools promote diversity and tolerance; having them convey a common core of civic values; having them teach traditional Christian values; and granting parents the choice of which schools their children will attend. The book can be ordered from McGraw-Hill, Inc. by calling 1-800-338-3987. ISBN 0-07-051825-4.

**** Divided Within, Besieged Without: The Politics of Education in Four American School Districts,* 1993**

Prepared by Public Agenda for the Charles F. Kettering Foundation. The result of two years of education reform research and over 200 face-to-face interviews with teachers, principals, administrators, school board members, parents, and business executives in four typical school systems, this report reveals a significant barrier to educational reform—political gridlock among education stakeholders. It describes the substantial in-fighting and communication gaps among these groups and concludes with several recommendations for improving dialogue. The report can be ordered from Public Agenda for $10.00.

***Effective Public Engagement,* 1993**

The New Standards Project, a national standards and assessment system that gauges student progress toward those goals, commissioned Public Agenda to explore public reactions to their programs. Although the study, based on 24 focus groups conducted with teachers, parents, high school students and members of the general public, was designed to find out how people respond to the New Standards Project, the handbook is useful to anyone interested in communicating about education reform, particularly in the areas of standards and assessment. To order, write or call The National Center on Education and the Economy, 700 11th Street NW, Suite 750, Washington, DC 20005. Tel: (202) 783-3668. The report is $5.00 for New Standards Project partners, $25.00 for non-partners.

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***The Closing Gateway: Californians Consider Their Higher Education System.* 1993**

This report was prepared by Public Agenda for the California Higher Education Policy Center. Based on the views expressed in eight California focus groups and phone surveys in California and across the nation, the study documents Californians' perceptions of the cost, accessibility, value, and opportunity in their higher education system and compares these attitudes with broader national attitudes citizens hold about their own state's higher education systems. To order, please call or write the California Higher Education Policy Center, 160 West Santa Clara Street, Suite 704, San Jose, CA 95113. When ordering, ask for report #93-6.

*** *Math Leads the Way: Perspectives on Math Reform.* 1993**

Public Agenda, in a study prepared for The Math Connection, surveyed participants in a national videoconference on math reform co-sponsored by WQED in Pittsburgh and the Math/Science Education Board in Washington, DC. The survey of more than 1,000 educators identified a broad consensus among math educators about the kinds of changes needed to improve student achievement. Single copies are available from Public Agenda for $7.50.

*** *Educational Reform: The Players and the Politics.* 1992**

Based on mail surveys conducted by Public Agenda in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation between January and March 1992, this report surveyed diverse groups with a stake in education: teachers, principals, superintendents, school board members, and in the private sector, business executives from major corporations. The study reports consensus among the groups over the goals of K-12 education but strong differences in their evaluations of the performance of the schools as well as fundamental disagreement over the scope and root of the problem and how to approach a solution. The report is $8.50 and can be ordered from Public Agenda.

*** *Crosstalk: The Public, the Experts, and Competitiveness.* 1991**

A research report from Public Agenda and the Business-Higher Education Forum. The report describes a gap between the way leaders and the public view the issue of U.S. economic competitiveness and the associated crisis in education and work force training. The report is $17.50 and can be ordered from Public Agenda.

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